**Five Tricky Personalities   
— and How to Handle Them**

**Use positive behavior management to keep even "difficult" students focused on learning this year.**

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Like every teacher, I know how crucial a task it is to develop the smooth running of a class. In my work in Australia and around the world, I've seen over and over again what a feat it can be to take 25 or more students of mixed ability, background, and temperament and build a cooperative, rights-respecting group. Certain kinds of student behavior — common to every classroom but maddening nonetheless — make that task even more challenging. But I've discovered that even the most difficult classroom personalities respond to positive discipline that balances rights and responsibilities.

In this article you'll find strategies that work for the following personality types:

**The Chatterbox** In a classroom, as I am observing, the teacher is explaining a point on the board prior to group activities, one student turns to another and begins whispering.

**Teacher:** "Lisa and Emma, I'm trying to teach!"  
**Lisa:** "I wasn't talking. Geez!"  
**Teacher:** "Lisa, I saw you talking to Emma. Don't talk while I'm teaching. Pay attention."  
**Lisa:** "C'mon, Emma just asked me about the work!"  
**Teacher:** "Look — I don't care who said what.  
(The teacher is naturally becoming irritated, especially by Lisa's tone and body language.)  
**Lisa:** "But, Emma "  
**Teacher:** "Lisa!" This loud response is followed by "One more word and I'll . . ." or a stand-up lecture: "I'm sick and tired of . . ." Either way, there is collateral damage.

**Strategies to Use**

1. **Give a positive direction or reminder, followed by thanks.** Focus on the desired behavior, rather than the behavior you don't want; for example, "One at a time" or "Remember our rule for manners" rather than "Don't butt in!" Keep the directions brief; avoid dwelling on the problem. In addition, I find it effective to use "thanks" rather than "please," even when correcting, because it communicates compliance with the behavioral objective
2. **Choose your tone of voice and body language.** How we're heard by students depends greatly on our characteristic nonverbal behavior. Saying the phrase "Walking quietly, thanks" in a sarcastic tone of voice while wagging a finger in students' faces will nullify your positive words. Keep control of your tone of voice, eye contact, proximity to the student, and body language.
3. **Try a strategic pause.** When teachers want to initiate and sustain attention, thoughtful use of the pause can help. A pause before giving the necessary direction conveys the expectation that the students look toward you, listen, and subsequently respond. When a teacher calls across the room to two students talking, "Lisa, Emma, what are you doing?," they may only hear their names mentioned, not the question that follows. It's better to start with the student's name (in a firmer tone), followed by a pause for attentive effect, then the direction.
4. **Keep the focus on the primary issue by knowing how to redirect.** If we ask talkative students to face the front and listen during instructional time, we are addressing primary behavior — that aspect of behavior that is primarily affecting our right to teach and others' right to learn. If they argue or sulk as a result, this behavior is secondary to the main issue of talking out of turn. Redirecting is a way of keeping the focus on the rule, the right, or the direction at hand rather than being drawn into secondary issues. You can do this by partially agreeing — dignifying the students' feelings — and then quickly shifting the focus back to the primary point.

**Strategies in Action**  
Lisa and Emma are chatting privately, distracting others while the teacher is explaining the assignment. The teacher stops talking. She knows that sometimes a sustained pause alone will be enough to trigger students' attention — but not this time. So she directs the girls to face the front and listen: "Emma . . ., Lisa . . ., facing this way and listening, thanks." Lisa, miffed, says, "But we were only talking about the work." The teacher is not interested, at this point, in the veracity of this statement. She redirects, "Maybe you were, but I want you to face the front and listen, thanks. You'll need to know this stuff." The teacher turns her attention to the rest of the class and resumes the task instructions as Lisa sulks — but quietly.

**The Clinger**

Next, we go to a primary-grade class, during a story-writing activity around the children's tables. Halid calls out across the room.

**Halid:** "Miss, Miss, I need you."  
**Teacher:** "Just a minute, Halid."  
**Halid:** "But Miss, I don't know what we're supposed to do next!"  
**Teacher:** "Look, I can't be in two places at once, can I?"  
**Halid:** (beginning to whine) "But Miss . . ."  
**Teacher:** "Oh, all right!" She goes over to help him, reinforcing the unhelpful association that when he calls out, she will always attend to him.

**Strategies to Use**

1. **Start with tactical ignoring.** Tactical ignoring is a teacher's conscious decision to ignore certain behavior and keep the focus on the flow of the lesson, or on acknowledging and reinforcing positive behavior. Students notice what the teacher does attend to — students who follow the rule and put their hand up and wait — and they often follow suit.
2. **Combine simple directions/reminders with hand signals.** If tactical ignoring doesn't work and the student's behavior affects other students' right to learn or your right to teach, try a simple direction or reminder: "Hands up without calling out, thanks" or "Remember our class rule." To reinforce or sometimes replace verbal directions, hand signals can be very effective — particularly if you've established them at the beginning of the year. For example, try a blocking hand to signal that a student should wait, or remind a child of the "hands-up" rule by raising one hand and putting the other to your mouth.
3. **Give children alternatives.** Establish a routine of "Ask three before you ask me" unless the assigned task is purely an individual one. Encourage students to help one another with procedures and to conference quietly at their tables, turning to you for help only as a last resort.

**Strategies in Action**  
During an art activity in a primary class, I move around the room chatting to students about the clay shapes they've made. At one table while conversing with a student, another opposite me starts pulling my clothes: "Hey, look at this, look at this — mine!" I could look; I could tell him off. Instead, I choose to tactically ignore. Eventually he gives up, raises his hand, and waits. Had he not, I would have shown a blocking hand, said "Waiting," and immediately given my attention back to the first student. In either case, as soon as I finish with the first student, if I turn to see the second still waiting quietly, I'll go enthusiastically to see his work.

**The Boycotter**

Across the hall, the third graders are hard at work on their mapping project — all except David, who sits staring glumly into space. His teacher knows he can do the work — that's what drives her crazy.

**Teacher:** "David, why aren't you working?"  
**David:** (sighs) "I dunno."  
**Teacher:** "Is there a problem with the assignment?"  
**David:** "Yeah . . . geography is boring."  
**Teacher:** "Boring, eh? Well, that's too bad. You'll just have to sit there and be bored until that map is done. . . . I don't care if it takes all day!"  
David hunkers down for the duration. The power struggle is on.

**Strategies to Use**

1. **Give students a choice — with consequences attached.** When students procrastinate or avoid tasks, give a directed choice/consequence. "If you choose not to do the work now, you will need to do it during free time" works especially well if free time normally involves activities such as board games, personal projects, or computer activities. The language of choice conveys the impression to students that their behavior is their responsibility and that they have some control over how they behave.
2. **Provide take-up time.** Take-up time refers to the time a teacher gives a student to respond to corrective discipline. After giving a direction or a reminder to a particular child, the teacher may conduct a relaxed eye-sweep of the entire group or turn away to attend to another student. In doing so, she conveys the expectation that the student will do what she has directed. This allows students to save face while they comply and permits teachers to avoid unnecessary, prolonged confrontations.
3. **Reestablish the relationship.** When you've given a correction and the student has complied — however grudgingly — it is important to go back later in the lesson and reestablish your relationship. You can do this with a positive whisper ("Nice to see you hard at work . . .") or even just a smile and an okay sign. It is reassuring to the child that, beyond the correction, his relationship with you is still okay; he is still accepted. A brief thanks or an acknowledgment says "I noticed your effort" and conveys that no grudges are held.

**Strategies in Action**  
Let's backtrack to near the beginning of the exchange between David and his teacher.

**Teacher:** "David . . . if you choose not to do your work now, you'll need to do it at recess."  
**David:** "It's not fair." He folds his arms and sulks.  
**Teacher:** "Perhaps not, but that's your choice."  
She walks away, giving David take-up time. Grumpily, David resumes his work half a minute later when he thinks she's not watching (though she can still see him in her peripheral vision). Just after the recess bell rings, she speaks to him again.  
**Teacher:** "I'm glad you made the right choice, David." She pats his arm as he goes off to play.

**The Debater**

In every school there are students who challenge teachers, who answer back and want the last word. They have ten reasons and explanations why it wasn't them, why it isn't fair, why the teacher always picks on them. The disconcerting reality is that a lot of the arguments between teacher and student begin on such petty issues, as we see in this upper-grade class.

**Teacher:** "Jason, why aren't you at your desk?"  
**Jason:** "I'm only borrowing a ruler from Dimi. Geez!"  
**Teacher:** "Look, don't lie to me. You were not getting a ruler. I saw you. (The teacher is becoming angry as he sees the grin surface on Jason's face that says, I'm conning you.) I'm sick and tired of your behavior!"  
**Jason:** "How do you know, anyway, whether I was getting a ruler or not? You can ask Dimi." (He folds his arms in megahuff mode. The whole class is watching.)  
**Teacher:** "You think you're so smart, don't you. Well, let me tell you . . ."

Here begins a mini-lecture that sees Jason slouch back to his chair, fuming. Still smarting from the previous fracas, the teacher interprets Jason's leaning back in his chair with a scowl on his face as blatant disrespect. He goes over and challenges the student.

**Teacher:** "What do you think you're doing now, eh?"

**Strategies to Use**

1. **Distinguish primary from secondary behavior.** When Jason's teachers describe him as a problem child, what they are referring to is the sum of his secondary behavior, which has more emotional weight than the primary behavior that precedes it. Even a mere "Yes!" in reply to a teacher's question can be annoying to both ear and eye. It is easy, even natural, to overreact or overfocus on students' secondary behavior — much more so if we impute inherent malignancy into their tone, manner, and words. Keep your focus on the primary behavior, at least for the moment.
2. **Avoid unnecessary power struggles.** While we can't directly control the argumentative student, we can control how we deal with the conflict. Reactive and defensive correction, especially when body language is hostile, extends the conflict and changes the behavioral focus away from the original direction or question. Students may play out their power struggle in front of a never-accommodating audience of peers. Remain assertive but civil, redirect the student to the primary issue and don't capitulate to secondary behavior by discussion, argument, or adversarial tactics.
3. **Plan a follow-up.** While it works to your advantage to tactically ignore the debater's secondary behavior in the heat of the moment, that doesn't mean you must let it go altogether — particularly if the child makes a habit of such behavior. Plan a follow-up discussion after class, during which you can explain (even demonstrate) to the student what the secondary behavior looks and sounds like and how it affects mutual rights.
4. **Strategies in Action**  
   In another upper-grade class, I noticed Bradley hadn't started his work. I walked over and casually asked, "Bradley, I notice that you haven't started. Any problems?" I was pleasant. To his response, "Yeah, well, I haven't got a pen, have I?" I replied, "That's okay. You can borrow one of mine." (Whenever I teach an upper-grade class, I take pens, pencils, rulers, and erasers with me — preventive management.) He muttered something, then said moodily, dropping his voice and eyes, "Yeah, well, I haven't got a ruler, have I?" Here I pointed to the box of materials on the teacher's desk: "You can borrow one of mine." His voice took on a frustrated edge as he said, "Yeah, well, I haven't got any paper. Gee!" Poor chap! I was disrupting his game. I was tempted to be sarcastic, but I said, "There's paper on my desk, as well." I pointed. "I'll come and see how you're doing later." Faced with this last helpful comment, he swore under his breath. As I moved away I saw him go to the teacher's desk to find what he needed. Later in the lesson, I gave him some encouragement that he received with controlled grunts. It's hard being civil.

**The Sulker**

Veronica is a popular, bright fifth grader. While she generally completes her work, her teachers inevitably describe her as having an attitude problem. In my first teaching session with her class, I noticed Veronica would wander from her seat during class time and chat with other students. I tactically ignored this for a while, then directed her to go back to her own desk. "Geez!" she responded (eyes rolling to the ceiling, followed by a sibilant sigh). "I was only borrowing an eraser from Michelle." Here a punctuated *tsk tsk* and averted eyes finished her sulky retort — typical secondary behavior. Almost every time I corrected her, even with simple reminders, this would occur. In class, I redirected and defused most of this behavior but finally decided that something more was needed.

**Strategies to Use**

1. **Schedule a follow-up chat, after school if necessary.** This kind of brief chat, with the door open for ethical probity, is designed to clarify what is happening during class time regarding students' behavior. It is essential that we convey to students that their habitual secondary behavior is unacceptable in terms of classroom rights and responsibilities. Such chats are at their most persuasive in the establishment phase of the year, acting as a "nip in the bud" approach — the message being that the teacher will always follow up on certain behavior after class time.
2. **Time your invitation effectively.** If teachers want to follow up with students after class for a chat, it is good policy to give the direction to stay back just before the recess bell. This avoids any prolonged discussions based on "What for?" "Why me?" or "What have I done?"
3. **Keep your presentation positive.** It is important to remember that our correction, guidance, and repair of strained relationships occurs within a working relationship. Keep the tone positive and friendly, and avoid threatening body language such as the extended finger. Better to talk with than to talk at.
4. **Offer to mirror the problem behavior.** Many students are quite unaware of how their secondary behavior appears. They certainly don't see it as we do. Teachers often interpret such behavior as rudeness and as an attack on their status. While it is rude, in our value judgment, it's really poor social skills, bad habits, or the student's gambit for attention or power within the class group. When we mirror what we see in their behavior and then explain our feelings and refer them to the class rule for respect or fair treatment, at the very least we've clarified what we mean by rudeness, and that such behavior affects working relationships.

**Strategies in Action**  
Just before the recess bell, I directed Veronica to stay back after class for a few minutes. "What for?" was her injured-party reply. I ignored this and dismissed the class. As the class left, Veronica folded her arms and slouched against the wall. I asked Veronica if there was a problem in class.

**Veronica:** (eyes down, subdued sulkiness) "Nope."  
**Teacher:** "Maybe you're feeling annoyed or upset because I've asked you to stay back?"  
**Veronica:** "Yeah. What did I do?"  
**Teacher:** "Do you remember when I asked you to go back to your own desk? Do you remember what you did and said?"  
Veronica gave me marginal eye contact at this point.   
**Teacher:** "Do you mind if I show you what you said?"  
**Veronica:** "What?"  
**Teacher:** "Let me show you."

Here I mirrored to her the postural, gestural, and tonal behavior I'd seen and heard that morning, complete with the tossed head and the hurt look to suggest gross unfairness on my part. As I gave the brief demonstration and came out of role and smiled, Veronica fought back an involuntary grin and said, "I don't do that all the time." "No, that's true," I replied, "but you do act like that many times. I don't speak like that to you, Veronica. When you speak like that, it shows disrespect because of the tone and the way you say it."

**Veronica:** "Yeah, well, I didn't mean it."  
**Teacher:** "Okay, maybe you didn't mean it, but that's what you said and that's how it sounded."

At this point, some students give a cursory apology. Avoid saying, "You're not really sorry, are you?" Accept the apology with a reminder of the school rule about respect.